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FM AMEMBASSY MINSK
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7028
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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000190

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/17/2033
TAGS: [PREL](#) [AMGT](#) [ASEC](#) [ODIP](#) [APER](#) [CMGT](#) [BO](#)
SUBJECT: KEEPING EMBASSY MINSK IN OPERATION: POST'S CURRENT
VIEWS ON EXPULSION THREAT

REF: A. MINSK 163
[1](#)B. MINSK 168
[1](#)C. MINSK 181
[1](#)D. STATE 26143
[1](#)E. MINSK 174

Classified By: Charge Jonathan Moore for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (U) This message has been reviewed by the full country team and cleared by section chiefs and agency heads (Charge, A/DCM, CONS, PAO, A/POL/ECON, MGT, RSO, DATT, RAO, AID) and is submitted in advance of the interagency meeting to discuss the subject issue at 10:00 local time in Washington on Monday March 17.

Background

[1](#)2. (S) The GOB lashed out in response to the U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control March 6 statement providing guidance on existing economic sanctions against the Lukashenko-controlled/state-owned Belarusian energy conglomerate "Belneftekhim." The initial response, presented both verbally (ref A) and in a diplomatic note (ref B), merely "suggested" that 1) the Ambassador be recalled for consultations and 2) the Embassy reduce its staffing to that of the Belarusian Embassy in Washington. As events unfolded, including the return to Minsk from Washington of Belarusian Ambassador Mikhail Khvostov on March 8, the regime ratcheted up the pressure on the Ambassador on March 11 to leave within 24 hours or be declared persona non grata (PNG). On that basis, and in consultation with Washington, the Ambassador left post March 12.

[1](#)3. (S) While escorting Ambassador to the border March 12, DCM was called by Presidential Foreign Policy Advisor Valentin Rybakov, who refused to speak to the Ambassador and indicated to the DCM that the Ambassador's departure mitigated only the GOB's threat to PNG her. Rybakov noted that a similar threat -- to PNG Embassy staff -- would follow no later than Monday March 17 if the Embassy did not move to do so voluntarily and follow up with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. As reported ref C, Charge delivered the State Department-drafted diplomatic note (ref D) March 13. The MFA has not yet contacted the Embassy to respond to the questions posed in the note.

State of Preparedness

14. (S/NF) It is important to note that we have taken full opportunity of the time we have had since March 12 to prepare for any necessary contingency, including the threat of forcing the departure in 24 hours of any combination of USDH employees. Appropriate briefings have taken place with all American staff, adult family members, and local Belarusian staff. We have reduced our classified information and equipment holdings to meet "critical" levels (two-hour burn time).

Current View: Expulsions Likely But Embassy Must Remain

15. (S/NF) We have a strong and experienced team here, adept at reading the sparse signals that offer indications of the regime's next steps. Given a baseline where we are one of only four embassies in the world rated by State's Bureau of Diplomatic Security as "Critical" for both human and technical intelligence threats, the increasing level of GOB harassment directed at both American and Belarusian staff -- including intense surveillance of certain American personnel and a flurry of requests from the Belarusian KGB to meet with our locally-employed staff -- is of particular interest. Getting rid of foreign diplomats seems to be the GOB's new favorite game: Lithuanian Ambassador Edminas Bagdonas reported to Charge March 14 that the regime is preparing to expel the Polish Ambassador over the upcoming introduction of ethnic Polish identity cards. We encourage as much support as can be raised from European friends and allies; in Minsk (and, we understand, in some EU capitals) there is a high level of indignation and some messages have already been

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passed to the GOB arguing against this kind of move.

16. (S) However, although the indiscriminate tossing out of American diplomats may be condemned in third country capitals, we have no reason to believe that the regime will not carry out this threat. Lukashenko is not merely Europe's last dictator: if he is consistent in anything, it is his instability and unpredictability. Since he became head of state in 1994, he has made many other outrageous acts and statements: two U.S. citizens in a hot-air balloon were shot down and killed by the Belarusian military on Lukashenko's orders; key democratic opposition leaders have been murdered, and others jailed for years at a time; he abolished the legitimately-elected parliament; the residences of several Ambassadors (including ours), were seized on his orders; Lukashenko has praised Hitler's leadership qualities, publicly admitted falsifying elections, and made scurrilous anti-Semitic remarks; and he has pursued close personal and financial ties with Chavez, Castro, and Ahmedinejad.

17. (S) Post emphatically supports the view of Ambassador Stewart that the USG must retain a presence in Belarus. As key opposition leaders told the Ambassador just minutes before her March 12 departure (ref E), it is essential that we be here to "stand up for the truth." To meet that goal, which post believes is also supported throughout the USG, Embassy Minsk needs as many opportunities as possible to impose logic and reason on this situation.

Proposed Reaction

18. (S) To bow to Lukashenko before his regime ups the ante would serve no purpose. However, if post is contacted by the MFA and told that PNGs are imminent, we need to have a solid, comprehensive response (recalling that their "suggestion" has been to match their staffing levels in Washington); based on information from OFM, the Belarusians have 20 positions at their embassy in Washington and two at their consulate general in New York.

¶A. If the Embassy is informed that we must reduce within 24 hours to Belarusian staffing levels in the U.S., we offer to reduce to 22 plus/plus 6 MSGs, leaving 28 USDH.

¶B. If told to reduce to a total of 22 USDH, the six-person MSG detachment would remain. Other agencies may need to reduce staffing as well.

¶C. If told to reduce to a number of 21 or lower, the balance of staffing in relation to USG policy priorities -- including the protection of U.S. citizens and the projection of U.S. policy -- may dictate post moving to unclassified operations, meaning that the Marine Security Guard Detachment and agencies that require classified processing would depart post. In that instance, Embassy Minsk would be forced to rely on a neighboring post, perhaps Embassy Vilnius, for limited classified access.

In any case, we ask the interagency not to consider these steps to be a bureaucratic exercise; we have carefully assembled lists of what positions would remain under the scenarios above -- shared with the State Department -- based on the needs of the mission. Efforts to use this turn of events to craft our staffing from a distance would not be useful.

Conclusion

¶9. (S) In any case, all of us in Minsk are grateful for the support we have already received from headquarters in Washington and colleagues in the region, most notably Ambassador John Cloud and his distinguished team in Vilnius. We defer to Ambassador Karen Stewart, who will be present at the March 17 meeting, to adjust any aspect of this message.
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